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A (New) Defense of Self-Forgiveness

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Introduction

Self-forgiveness is an ambivalent moral phenomenon. On the one hand, it manifests strength of character and a willingness to transform; on the other hand, it is often associated with self-indulgence (Gamlund 2014: 238, Holmgren 1998: 85). While forgiveness of others is typically seen in a positive light, self-forgiveness is often viewed with suspicion and as potentially reflecting a lack of concern for the victim. In a parallel way, while blame of others often raises concerns, one finds much less to object to people who blame themselves.[1]

In the present discussion, I challenge this overly demanding picture of the moral self-relationship by focusing on self-forgiveness, a topic that, contrary to interpersonal forgiveness, has received relatively little attention.[2] One explanation is that, as Gamlund suggests, "(…) the structure of self-forgiveness is assumed to follow that of interpersonal forgiveness, and thus that a separate analysis is not needed" (2014: 238). As I shall argue, this is misguided. Self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others certainly have much in common but there are nonetheless many important insights to be gained by focusing directly on self-forgiveness.

The goal of the paper is to resolve a contradiction arising from the combination of two theses. Both are plausible, but one needs to be rejected as the two taken together are inconsistent: (1) Self-forgiveness, like other forms of forgiveness, is at least sometimes morally justified and (2) Only victims can rightly forgive.[3] The contradiction stems from the fact that in self-forgiveness we often forgive ourselves for what we did to others (Gamlund 2014: 244), i.e. we forgive without

[1] With the exception of Todd & Rabern (2022). For a discussion of this asymmetry in blame see Nelkin (2022).
[2] Among people who have written on self-forgiveness Dillon (2001), Goldie (2012), Hughes (1994), Willinston (2012), Gamlund (2014), Griswold (2007), Holmgren (1998), Snow (1993). Gamlund's paper is especially helpful when thinking about ethical aspects of self-forgiveness. For a particularly thorough discussion of self-forgiveness, see Milam (2017). More recently see Monge (2023). Self-forgiveness has also been the object of some studies in psychology and sociology, among them see Wenzel et al. (2021) and Woodyatt et al. (2017).
[3] This contradiction has already been pointed out by others such as Milam (2017).

being the victim.[4] By forgiving oneself, one thus automatically fails to comply with what has been labelled the "victim-only" norm of forgiveness (Milam 2017: 49).[5] This failure is usually presented as a problem about standing (Milam 2017: 62).

There are different ways to frame a standing problem for self-forgiveness, but a common idea has to do with a person's lack of authority understood either in a conceptual or a moral way. This distinction corresponds to the distinction between the possibility and the permissibility of self-forgiveness.[6] On the first reading, the problem is that it is analytic than only victims can forgive, just like only bachelors can be single. That is, the idea is that it might not be possible for other people than the victim to forgive (Milam 2017: 64). On the second reading, we find the idea that it is always morally inappropriate to forgive oneself (Milam 2017: 62). The problem on which I shall focus in this paper is that self-forgiveness can be seen as a way of depriving the victim of her prerogative to forgive. While arguing that this is not the case, I will provide a solution to both kinds of standing problems.

While I am not the first to offer a defense of self-forgiveness, previous discussions have not focused on what I perceive as the fundamental issue: the link between self-forgiveness and forgiveness from the victim. Per-Erik Milam (2017) for instance has proposed a compelling defense of self-forgiveness by providing a positive account of self-forgiveness and considering various formulations of the standing problem. However, these types of defenses do not directly challenge the idea that forgiveness is among the victim's prerogative.

A second objective of the paper is to show that if we are to discuss self-forgiveness, we must do so largely independently of a comparison with interpersonal forgiveness. I will be advocating a view on which self-forgiveness is not an imperfect form of forgiveness (cf. Griswold 2007: 127) or a second-best alternative to forgiveness from the victim (Snow 1993: 75).[7]

The paper is structured as follows. Section I provides a definition of self-forgiveness. In section II, I discuss self-forgiveness' ambivalent nature. Section III clarifies the link between self-forgiveness and forgiveness from the victim and shows that the claim according to which only victims can rightly forgive is unfounded. I thus tackle the permissibility question for self-

[4] As others like Gamlund (2014) have indicated, the same problem arises with third-party forgiveness as self-forgiveness is a type of third-party forgiveness.
[5] In this paper I focus on self-forgiveness for wrongs done to others and set aside self-forgiveness for wrongs done to oneself, in which one would be both victim and perpetrator.
[6] I am very grateful to Per-Erik Milam for helpful correspondence on these issues.
[7] If successful, my plea in favor of the permissibility and coherence of self-forgiveness will also provide grounds for defending third-party forgiveness as it typically faces a similar problem of standing having to do with the claim that only victims can forgive. For stimulating discussions of third-party forgiveness see MacLachlan (2017) as we all Chaplin (2019).

forgiveness. Finally, in section IV, I discuss additional problems for self-forgiveness having to do with the possibility question.[8]

I. What Is Self-Forgiveness?

Many different things are described as 'forgiveness'. We sometimes speak of forgiveness when we seek to free someone from the weight of their guilt; in this context, forgiveness is performative (Warmke 2016). For some, forgiveness means renouncing any will for punishment (Zaibert 2009) or protest (Pereboom 2021). For others, it must be defined in terms of process, for instance, that of overcoming negative emotions. Finally, some philosophers argue that it is not possible to give a single definition of forgiveness because it is too disparate a phenomenon (Fricker 2019).

Usually, forgiveness refers to what happens between two individuals, when the victim forgives her offender for something he did to her. Forgiveness is also sometimes referred to in the political context as forgiving a group or a nation for actions taken on behalf of the many. Finally, there is a form of intrapersonal forgiveness in which a person forgives herself, which is the phenomenon I am interested in in this paper. I lean towards a pluralistic position with regard to the general phenomenon of forgiveness. Still, a minimal or working definition of self-forgiveness as a unified phenomenon can be put forward.

Self-forgiveness entails the following elements:[9] 1. Before forgiving oneself, one must blame oneself thus experiencing negative emotions such as guilt, remorse, shame or self-anger. There can be no self-forgiveness without self-blame, and it is at least plausible that there can be no blame without emotions (Menges 2017, Wolf 2011).[10] 2. One transforms one's perspective on oneself, thus voluntarily relinquishing the negative emotions. 3. One considers that, following this transformation, the above-mentioned emotions that once were appropriately felt towards oneself will no longer be internally rational. So, self-forgiveness is a form of transformation of the moral self-relationship. This transformation, in turn, can be understood as a form of self-reconciliation such as, for instance, the restoration of self-respect (Dillon 2001). To some, it will appear that this definition leaves a lot of room for abusive forms of self-forgiveness. As we will see, this is a point in its favor.

[8] Note that, as Milam observes, the permissibility question takes it for granted that the notion of self-forgiveness is not incoherent. Indeed, to ask whether self-forgiveness is permissible assumes that there is a thing that is aptly described as self-forgiveness (2017: 63).

[9] My suggestion builds on Milam's definition of self-forgiveness (2017: 56) as well as on Gamlund's (2014).

[10] Gamlund (2014: 239) also emphasizes that there cannot be self-forgiveness without wrongdoing. I don't see wrongdoing as a necessary condition. However, I agree with Milam who says that the self-forgiver must at least *believe* that he has done something wrong (2017: 55).

II. Too Easy or Too Demanding? Two Faces of Self-Forgiveness

One worry with self-forgiveness is that it conflicts with a picture on which only the victim can forgive. The problem, then, is that self-forgiveness can be interpreted as a way of depriving the victim of one of her prerogatives. As we shall see, this way of thinking about the relation between self-forgiveness and the victim's forgiveness is misleading.

Concerns about the relation of self-forgiveness to forgiveness from the victim arise in a variety of situations. Scrolling on *Quora*[11], one can stumble over the story of a man, Brian G., who explains how he came to forgive himself after having emotionally abused his wife for ten years. This is stylized description of Brian's story:

> **Abusive Brian**: Brian only cared about himself and used to manipulate people, including his wife so he could feel loved and get "his physical and emotional needs met". After his wife finally left him, Brian decided to forgive himself because he could no longer bear the weight of his guilt. His advice for reaching self-forgiveness is the following: first, apologize to yourself and to God. Second, don't judge yourself. Third, remember that everyone makes mistake and forgive yourself. Finally, he invites other abusers seeking forgiveness "to not carry the weights of regrets".

Brian's story is shocking on more than one count and illustrates how easily a person can forgive herself in an inappropriate manner. By forgiving himself, Brian showed even greater disrespect for the norms he has violated and for the suffering of his wife. It is typically in reaction to such cases that one may be led to view self-forgiveness with suspicion.[12]

The idea that it is among the victim's prerogative to decide whether the offender can be forgiven is deeply rooted in our understanding of the phenomenon. Isn't it awkward to imagine that someone else could be allowed to forgive my offender for what he did to me? Yet, if we accept that such intuitions also apply to self-forgiveness, we are left only with the possibility of self-forgiveness in cases in which the only victim of our misdeed is ourselves. One example of such case would be if one mocks oneself in public, being both victim and perpetrator.

The moral problem with Brian's example is not, in my view, explained by the fact that he forgives himself "in the place of the victim". While Brian's is at fault, it is not because he is

[11] *Quora* is an online platform for informal exchanges where people can ask questions on any topic and get advice from the rest of the community.

[12] In addition to these problems, Brian seems to forgive himself for the wrong kind of reason. I shall say more about reasons for self-forgiveness in what follows.

depriving the victim of her prerogative to forgive. Self-forgiveness does not make forgiveness from the victim pointless. Let me explain what I have in mind with the help of the following scenario:

> **Amputation:** Due to a car accident, I must have my leg amputated in the hospital. Fortunately for me, a qualified surgeon (surgeon A) agreed to perform the operation. Also working in this hospital is another qualified surgeon (surgeon B) who decides to perform the operation on a whim during her lunch break.

If I am amputated of one of my limbs, my own perspective on my physical condition does not matter: whether I like it or not, either way, I am amputated. In this situation, surgeon B performed an operation and I find myself with a missing leg. What is done is done and there is nothing left for surgeon A to do. She cannot claim, for instance, that she needs to cut the leg again under the pretext that surgeon B lacked the proper authority to perform it.

With forgiveness and self-forgiveness, things are different because there is still something for the victim's forgiveness to do even if the perpetrator forgave himself. One cannot equate the states of being forgiven and of being amputated because forgiveness will always be relative to a forgiving agent whereas being amputated does not depend on anyone's perspective.[13] Being forgiven, contrary to being amputated, is a fact that is relative to someone: it is a relational fact. Brian's situation shows that forgiveness is relative to an individual's perspective and that there is no such thing as "forgiven" simpliciter as there is a state of being "amputated" simpliciter. Brian's attitude is problematic because he did something terrible and shouldn't forgive himself so easily, but it is not problematic because he is depriving the victim of her prerogative. Self-forgiveness and other-forgiveness have different functions. While self-forgiveness serves to repair the self-relationship, other-forgiveness is about the relationship to others (Snow 1993: 75).[14] So, the fact that someone forgives oneself doesn't tell us much about his relationship to the victim or on whether blame from the victim is appropriate or not.

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[13] Some remark by Gamlund might be interpreted as disagreeing with this observation when he says: "(…) the act or process of self-forgiveness cannot be a one-sided affair that takes place irrespective of the victim's involvement. It is the victim who has been wronged and the victim should therefore be the first person to consider whether or not the wrongdoer should be forgiven" (2014: 246).

[14] Here I don't want to go into a detailed explanation of the different functions of forgiveness as there is an abundant literature on the subject. See for instance Griswold (2007) and Warmke, Nelkin, & McKenna, (eds.), (2021). Let us still note that in the absence of self-forgiveness, the relationship to oneself seems to be destabilized. It is noticeable that people who blame themselves and have not yet managed to forgive themselves find it hard to really enjoy happy moments, to treat themselves, to receive praise and compliments, etc. Self-forgiveness, in general, allows one to return to a more harmonious relationship with oneself.

There are two important things to remark about Brian's situation. The first is that Brian is genuinely though inappropriately forgiving himself.[15] This claim could be challenged by arguing that self-forgiveness entails reflection, apology and so on and that Brian is not really forgiving himself. Maybe he is rather letting go of his blame (Brunning & Milam 2023) or excusing himself. I will address this objection in part IV when I attend to the issue of the right versus wrong kinds of reason for forgiveness.

A second point is that it could be argued that although there is no such thing as being forgiven *simpliciter*, self-forgiveness is still, in some sense, conditional on the victim's forgiveness. In part III, I expand on the relation of self-forgiveness to victim's forgiveness and explain why they are psychologically and normatively independent of one another. For now, we at least have intuitive grounds for dismissing the idea that the victim can be robbed of her prerogative to forgive. She is not robbed because the perpetrator self-forgiveness doesn't perform the function that her forgiveness would perform.

We have seen a first problem for self-forgiveness, the fact that it seems to imply that the victim is deprived of one of her prerogatives. Let me now discuss another case having to do with the fact that we sometimes fail to forgive ourselves even though we should.

> **Guilty Michelle**: Michelle was fifteen years old when her sister Jessica tried to commit suicide. After her suicide attempt, Jessica was admitted to a clinic for several weeks and Michelle did not visit her. To explain her lack of support, Michelle recounts that she felt emotionally inhibited and had difficulty contacting her because of the associated trauma. Today, some twenty years after the events, the two sisters are back in touch and on good terms, but Michelle finds it difficult to forgive herself her lack of support, even though Jessica has explicitly forgiven her. This continued guilt has an impact on Michelle's quality of life as she doesn't consider herself to be a good person and to be worthy of love. She could finally forgive herself when she began receiving professional help.

This second example indicates that, although we can sometimes forgive ourselves too easily like Brian, we can also struggle to do so. Self-forgiveness can sometimes be harder to achieve than interpersonal forgiveness. Indeed, Jessica forgave Michelle even when Michelle could not forgive

[15] Against this, Holmgren (1998: 76) claims that "There is a process that we must work through in response to the wrongdoing. The wrongdoer's self-forgiveness may be incompatible with respect for her victim, herself, and her moral obligations if it is undertaken before the process is complete. In that case her self-forgiveness would also not be genuine".

herself. It is possible that the victim no longer feels wronged, while the perpetrator feels that what she has done requires additional steps or that some more time passes before she can forgive herself. Thus, it looks like the victim's forgiveness does not always imply the perpetrator's self-forgiveness.

Michelle's example provides us with a foundation for defending proposition (1), according to which self-forgiveness is at least sometimes morally justified. There are cases in which the victim's forgiveness is not enough to relieve the guilt of a remorseful perpetrator and in which we are reluctant to conclude that the offender must simply remain crippled by guilt. This is also true of other types of situations already mentioned: when the victim is unwilling or unable to forgive, for example because she is dead.

With cases such as Michelle's, puzzling questions arise: why doesn't forgiveness from the victim automatically entail self-forgiveness and why does it seem, sometimes, that it need not entail it? This is as much a psychological as a normative question. We usually blame ourselves for hurting another person. If the victim insists that they have forgiven us, there seems to be no reason not to forgive oneself; blaming oneself no longer has any part to play and seems to be morally unwarranted as well.[16] [17] I will now try to answer this question by putting some flesh on the idea that self-forgiveness is independent from the victim's forgiveness while, at the same time, arguing that we can reject proposition (2).

III. Self-Forgiveness and Forgiveness from the Victim

In this section, I defend the somewhat controversial view according to which self-forgiveness's moral evaluation is largely independent of the question whether the victim has also forgiven or would forgive.[18] By arguing against the victim prerogative to forgive (VP) I tackle the permissibility question.

Consider again Brian's case and let us imagine that his wife, Maria, has forgiven him because she needs to move on. My intuition is that, in such a case, Brian's self-forgiveness would still be morally inappropriate. Similarly, in Michelle's situation, my intuition is that Michelle's self-

[16]As Milam points out in a footnote, all the conceptions of self-forgiveness, and among them, his own view, are committed to deny the victim-only requirement. See for example Dillon (2001) Snow (1993). His own account, while denying the victim only requirement does not dispute the fact that victim have "a special moral prerogative to forgive" (2015: 15).

[17] As has already been pointed out by others, the victim cannot hold forgiveness arbitrarily hostage. For example, Milam (2018) argues that forgiveness is not always elective, and that, like any phenomenon that answers to reasons, it can sometimes even be required.

[18] Many, like Gamlund (2014: 237) for instance, insist that one should "ask the victim for forgiveness before contemplating self-forgiveness". I do not deny that it is important, morally speaking, that one offers an apology before forgiving oneself. Rather my claim is that there can be morally permissible forgiveness even in the absence of forgiveness from the victim.

forgiveness would still be appropriate even if her sister did not forgive her because she was terribly hurt by Michelle's attitude. In other words, self-forgiveness *prima facie* appears to be independent from the victim's forgiveness on a normative level. I will now explain in more detail how, in my view, the two attitudes are indeed morally independent from one another and will discuss an objection arising from the fitting attitude analysis framework.

It is worth noting that VP is endorsed by most philosophers. Trudy Govier & Wilhelm Verwoerd (2002) remark that "The appeal to VP is often highly intuitive. It strikes many people as "just obvious" that victims have an exclusive entitlement to forgive wrongdoers for the wrongs done to them. However (…) if one seeks grounds for the intuition, one can find them" (2001: 102). Arguments supporting the normative dependence of self-forgiveness on forgiveness from the victim or "victim-exclusive views" (Chaplin 2019: 78) usually take as a starting point the idea that when other people than the victim forgive they "they overstep the bounds of moral propriety" (Chaplin 2019 : 80), that is, by forgiving something they are in no position to forgive they somehow erase a debt they were in no position to erase because they weren't the one owed the debt. Below, I show how these worries are unfounded.

The Argument from Subjectivity

Let me begin with the argument from subjectivity. This argument helps explain why self-forgiveness is morally independent from the victim's forgiveness. It will allow us to make sense of the intuition that it can sometimes be appropriate for the victim to forgive while being inappropriate for the wrongdoer to forgive himself or, on the contrary, that it can be appropriate for the perpetrator to forgive himself while also being appropriate for the victim not to forgive. The answer to the question "When is forgiveness morally appropriate?" depends on many factors. Relevant to the question whether we should forgive someone are the perpetrator's motives, the consequence of the act in question as well as the question whether the perpetrator has apologized, changed his behavior and so on. Nevertheless, another feature of our moral experience has largely escaped philosophers' attention: whether forgiveness is morally warranted is to a certain extent subject-relative.

This is not to say that morality is simply "on demand" and that we can make our own moral rules according to what we care about and what we don't. It rather means that forgiveness, like blame, is an attitude that is not merely a reaction to some moral wrong but a reaction to something wrong that was inflicted to us *by someone.* If my friend slaps me in the face and I blame him, I won't simply blame the fact that "a slap was given", my blame doesn't just register an anonymous moral wrong. In this situation, my blame is a reaction to the fact that my friend, who is a person with a

history, character traits, a set of beliefs, etc. has slapped someone who is me, a person who also has a particular history, fears, beliefs, convictions, moral commitments, etc.

It appears that blame and forgiveness are attitudes whose conditions of moral appropriateness are, to a certain extent, subject-relative. By this I mean that the conditions are relative to a subject, not that they are dependent on a subjective response. If I don't mind slaps at all and I see that my friend regrets his action, I will be able to forgive him quickly in a way that appears to be morally appropriate. By contrast, if I'm terrified of slaps, I would also be morally justified in not forgiving him right away. When we interact with people, in the context of friendship, love or family for instance, we must accept that our behavior cannot be entirely governed by universal and objective norms but also to some extent by the character – among other things - of the people we are dealing with. One striking fact about forgiveness and self-forgiveness is thus that they are subject to moral luck in the sense described by Williams[19] : whether and when one is going to be forgiven for a given offense is, to a certain extent, subject to luck. What else do these considerations allow us to conclude about the links between victim forgiveness and self-forgiveness? Sometimes the victim will be morally justified in forgiving while the perpetrator will not be justified in doing so and vice versa. Therefore, self-forgiveness is independent from forgiveness. The point is that moral appropriateness conditions for forgiveness and self-forgiveness can come apart. In order to illustrate what has been said so far, consider the following situation:

> **Kitty:** Benjamin negligently runs over Lea's cat. Lea is devastated but understands that Benjamin regrets this accident and its consequences. As he promises to be more careful, she forgives him. What she doesn't know, however, is that Benjamin is an animal rights activist who considers an animal's life to be just as valuable as his own. He therefore judges that he has committed something unforgivable, considering the values he lives by. Although Lea has forgiven him, Benjamin is unable to forgive himself.

Both Lea and Benjamin react to these events and judge Benjamin's actions according to different values and commitments. Lea forgives Benjamin because she sees that he regrets what happened and that is enough for her. We could also imagine that Benjamin will forgive himself when he feels that he has made amends. For example, he might undertake additional driving lessons, which will reassure him that he has done all he can to ensure that such a situation does not occur again. Importantly, it appears that Benjamin and Lea are both morally justified in their respective

[19] See Williams (1981).

attitudes.[20] Imagine that it was Lea who held the belief that an animal's life is just as valuable as her own. In this situation she might not forgive so readily, which would be morally appropriate, but Benjamin could still forgive himself in a way that also appears morally appropriate.

Here it could be objected that my conception of the appropriateness of self-forgiveness is not only partly subject-relative, but completely subjective. There would therefore be the risk that someone who judges that murder is not a big deal could "appropriately" forgive himself quite easily. My claim is not that the subject's values set *all* the conditions under which self-forgiveness will be morally appropriate, but simply that they must be taken into account when assessing self-forgiveness. Crucially, they may explain why in some cases it is appropriate for the victim to forgive while being inappropriate for the perpetrator to forgive himself, or vice versa.

To summarize, there are two sets of elements that need to be taken into account when assessing the permissibility of self-forgiveness: objective and subjective ones. Objective elements are those features of a situation that do *not* depend on any particular perspective. If we consider our Kitty case, the objective elements are that a cat was killed, that it was an accident and that Benjamin (perpetrator) apologized to Lea (the victim[21]). On the other hand, the subjective elements are these elements that depend on the sensibilities, histories and commitments of the parties involved. Among them is the fact that Benjamin considers that an animal's life is as valuable as his own.

Now, how do these conditions interact when assessing the permissibility of self-forgiveness? Roughly, objective conditions determine when it would be morally permissible for someone to forgive themselves or when they could reasonably expect (although probably not demand) that the victim would forgive them. Given that it was an accident and that he has apologized, there would be nothing wrong with Benjamin forgiving himself and it is reasonable for him to expect Lea to forgive him too. Objective features of a situation are thus the common grounds on which one can morally assess both self-forgiveness and forgiveness from the victim.

On the other hand, subjective conditions are relevant when separately assessing self-forgiveness from forgiveness from the victim (or vice versa). Subjective conditions having to do with the perpetrator's sensibilities can explain that a perpetrator would sometimes be morally justified in taking additional steps before they can forgive themselves. Subjective conditions having to do with the victim's sensibilities can also explain why a victim can be justified in retaining forgiveness even when self-forgiveness from the perpetrator would be morally permissible. Let us imagine again that it was Lea who was an animal right activist. In this case, she would probably be

[20] They are of course also dependent on other things such as character, strength of will, personal interests, etc., but all of them are, in one way or another, tied to the person's moral commitments.
[21] Of course, it might be thought that the primary victim in this is the cat.

justified in retaining forgiveness a bit longer than it would take for Benjamin to forgive himself. Note, however, that these subjective conditions cannot justify a perpetrator in forgiving oneself more easily than is morally warranted by the objective elements of the situation. For instance, even if Benjamin didn't care at all about cats, it would be wrong of him to forgive himself without, say, apologizing to Lea. It would also be *pro tanto* wrong for a victim to forgive a completely unapologetic perpetrator even if, for reasons having with her well-being and her right to move on, it might be all things considered morally justified.

There is a second way in which these subjective conditions are subject to a moral threshold: the fact that someone is very hurt by the death of one's cat is a reason to retain forgiveness for some times but not forever.[22] The same goes for Benjamin: while it is understandable that he needs to go through further steps before he can forgive, it would be wrong of him to blame himself forever.[23] I now move on to a second argument.

The Non-Blaming Victim Argument

Here is another reason for thinking that self-forgiveness is morally independent from the victim's forgiveness: there can be non-blaming victims.[24] The idea is that you can wrong someone without having the victim blame you. In this case, it appears that self-forgiveness is morally permissible – provided that one takes the necessary steps to repair the damage done - even in the absence of forgiveness (and blame) from the victim. Imagine that one speaks harshly to one's dad and blames oneself for it. Imagine also that the dad does not blame them, because they are their child, and he feels incapable of resenting them. In this case, there can be no forgiveness from the victim, the dad, because he does not blame. However, we still feel that it would be right for the perpetrator, at some point, to forgive themselves.

Another case would be one in which you wrong someone, but that person does not know it either because she lacks factual knowledge of what you did or the understanding that what you did was wrong. For instance, imagine that someone speaks harshly about one's friend in their back. In these cases, it seems once again that self-forgiveness can exist independently of the victim's forgiveness, and, moreover, that it can be morally permissible provided that the perpetrator corrects the situation. If self-forgiveness can sometimes exist independently from the victim's forgiveness, I don't see any reason to think that it cannot always exist independently. Similarly, if

[22] On the question whether forgiveness is elective see Milam (2018), where he argues that it isn't.
[23] At least if one accepts that one can be in a moral relationship to oneself and not merely a prudent one.
[24] Gamlund (2014: 250-251) provides an illuminating discussion of the ethics of self-forgiveness in cases in which, for instance, the victim is dead.

forgiveness can sometimes be morally permissible in the absence of forgiveness from the victim, it is tempting to conclude that it is never a condition on permissible forgiveness that the victim has forgiven.

A way to object to the picture of the relationship between the victim's forgiveness and self-forgiveness that I have suggested is inspired by fitting attitude theories (Rabinowicz & Rønnow-Rasmussen 2004). One could argue that even if there is no victim, the victim is not offended, or the victim does not know about the wrong in question, self-forgiveness is only appropriate[25] if the victim's forgiveness *would* be appropriate. One reason for adopting such a strategy is that there is a strong intuition according to which the victim's attitude matters. As much as I recognize the pull of such intuitions, I think that they are misleading: the victim attitude matters when deciding whether *she* must forgive but has no direct normative significance for self-forgiveness. I see no reason to think that the analysis in terms of fitting/appropriate attitudes should run from the victim's forgiveness to self-forgiveness. One could very well say that forgiveness from the victim is appropriate only if self-forgiveness is appropriate.

Maybe I am going too fast here, and I am ignoring the main reason why the victim has a say in self-forgiveness. It could be claimed that when we harm someone, we waive some of the rights we have over other people like that of being treated with benevolence and, going even further, that we should be somewhat "submissive" to the victim. The underlying thought would be something like: "by having violated moral rules, one opens oneself to being treated as "inferior" to the victim. As one has disrupted the moral equilibrium one must, in order to restore it, submit oneself to the victim's wishes until one has made sufficient amends, and the victim cannot retain forgiveness anymore". This, in turn, would explain why self-forgiveness is normatively tied to forgiveness from the victim.

As compelling as this sounds, I do not think it will do. We should distinguish again between an agent forgiving oneself and an agent judging that he is forgiven *simpliciter* and that there is nothing for the victim's forgiveness to do. Self-forgiveness need not entail such a belief. Importantly, the fact that one forgives oneself does not mean that there is nothing for the victim's forgiveness to do. Let us imagine that Brian has forgiven himself after going to therapy and apologizes sincerely to his wife. On the one hand, it would seem appropriate that his wife would still refuse to forgive him. On the other hand, it would probably be appropriate that Brian forgives himself at some point. Importantly, the fact that his wife does not forgive him is still a good reason for Brian to be attentive to her and to show that he regrets what he did even if he has forgiven himself. What explains that we think of self-forgiveness as being morally dependent on the victim's forgiveness

[25] Here I use "appropriate" as meaning "morally appropriate".

is not that self-forgiveness is normatively tied to the victim's forgiveness but that both self-forgiveness and other-forgiveness are often morally appropriate under similar conditions, for instance that the perpetrator has apologized. But to say that self-forgiveness is appropriate when the victim's forgiveness is appropriate seems to miss the point altogether. To reduce the appropriateness conditions of self-forgiveness to the appropriateness condition of forgiveness from the victim is to deny the existence of a genuine moral relationship to the self, governed by different, subject-relative norms, and this seems like an unwelcome conclusion. My claim then is that contrary to a widely accepted picture on which self-forgiveness and other-forgiveness stand and fall together their appropriateness condition may sometimes be different. This point becomes evident if one considers takes into account the subjective conditions on forgiveness and self-forgiveness permissibility that I mentioned in the previous section.

When saying that only the victim can forgive, we find two distinct normative notions at play: one moral and the other conceptual. The first normative notion was that only the victim is *morally* justified in forgiving. Second, there was the idea that it is analytic that forgiveness can only be performed by a victim, just like it is analytic that being a bachelor implies being single. These were, respectively, the permissibility and possibility questions. In the present section, I have argued that the permissibility objection fails. Still, there might be conceptual concerns for self-forgiveness, thus having to do with the possibility question. I now turn to them.

IV. Additional Concerns for Self-Forgiveness

Duties to Oneself and Self-forgiveness

Forgiveness normally entails a relationship between two people: a victim and a perpetrator. One additional concern for self-forgiveness is thus the following: can a single individual enter the kind of dyadic relationship required by moral phenomena such as forgiveness, duty or promise? This is a conceptual rather than a moral question. To answer this kind of worry, a parallel with the notion of duty to oneself is useful.

In his critique of the possibility of duties to oneself, Marcus Singer (1959, 1963) explains that the notion of duty to oneself does not have the same significance as that of duty owed to others. His argument relies on the intuitive idea that a duty is not something that one can release oneself from at will. Singer's view is that since we can release ourselves of anything that we impose on ourselves, there can be no genuine duties to oneself. The same reasoning could be applied to self-forgiveness. This would take the following form: as we are free at all times to forgive ourselves,

self-forgiveness does not have the same significance as forgiveness of others. Peter Goldie provides a nice formulation of this worry when he says that "The idea of self-forgiveness seems to many people to be a deeply paradoxical notion, as if just by a self-addressed fiat - "Ego me absolve a peccatis meis"- I can cleanse myself of my past wrongdoings (Goldie 2012: 99). Further, the fact that people like Brian can forgive themselves so easily suggests that there weren't *really* blaming themselves in the first place, thus threatening the coherence of self-forgiveness.

As Daniel Muñoz (2020) recently showed, there is no contradiction in claiming that we can have a duty to ourselves despite being in a position to release oneself from it. This is precisely the notion of self-release that led Singer to dismiss duties to oneself as contradictory. Muñoz answers the objection by showing that it is possible to make sense of self-release (Muñoz, 2020: 698) and goes on to show that it is not because something could be made permissible that it is actually permissible. For example, it might be possible for me to make it permissible to stay in bed all week by releasing myself from the duty to take care of my health without it meaning that it is actually permissible. At time t I decide that I want to exercise every day and promise myself that I will go on a run every morning. At time t' I decide that I don't want to run anymore and at time t" I am released from my obligation to run every morning. This, according to Muñoz, doesn't mean that, at time t, I didn't have an obligation to myself to run every morning. What happens at t" is not permissible from my point of view at time t (Muñoz 2020: 698). Why precisely? Because at that moment I had not lifted the obligation yet. What would indeed be contradictory would be something like "I have an obligation to run every morning, but I don't have to". According to Muñoz, the fact that I can release myself from a duty does not imply that I didn't have a duty in the first place.[26]

If we apply these remarks to self-forgiveness, we are driven to conclude that the intuition according to which someone who is able to forgive himself must not have been genuinely blaming oneself in the first place isn't true either. The fact that we sometimes forgive ourselves too easily, like Brian did, does not threaten the coherence of self-forgiveness. Being in a position to forgive oneself does not mean that one is not blaming oneself (or that one has already forgiven oneself).

It is the criteria associated with the interpersonal aspects of forgiveness that make the reflexive phenomenon look dubious and particularly the implicit idea that, in order for the phenomenon to be both coherent and moral, the forgiver must be a *separate* person. Self-

[26] An attentive reader of Muñoz will note that there is much more to his argument. For instance, he insists that a duty from which one can release oneself, a waivable duty, even if it remains strictly speaking a duty, is "finkish", insofar as it does not really constrain action. In Muñoz (2021) he argues that a waivable duty to oneself should rather be understood as a prerogative, i.e., as something that can justify our actions rather than constrain them. Here the analogy between duty to the self and forgiveness is merely used to show that it is not because we are in a position to do something (release ourselves from a duty, forgive ourselves) that we are already released or forgiven and thus that self-forgiveness is not incoherent.

forgiveness is a perfectly coherent phenomenon even if there is necessarily only one person. What can be granted is that self-forgiveness, like self-blame, require that one is able to adopt a second personal posture towards oneself (Darwall 2006, Schofield 2021).

It is useful to point out that when we forgive ourselves, there is a sense in which we look at ourselves as if we were a bit "alien" to ourselves or as if we were "another".[27] When forgiving ourselves for something we did, we often forgive the person we were, not exactly the person we still are today. Of course, we are still the "same"[28] person, but we are also different in some respect, for instance we might have progressed morally. It would indeed be strange to say: I forgive myself for the fact that I am generally speaking a selfish person, but I have no intention of doing anything about it. And so, as Paul Schofield (2021) has argued, there is no reason to think that one individual cannot enter a dyadic relationship with oneself. I now turn to a second objection having to do with the *possibility* question, the "right-reason" view of forgiveness.

The "Right-Reason" View of Forgiveness and Its Problems

In section I, I gave a definition of forgiveness that left open the possibility that individuals like Brian are genuinely forgiving themselves. Nevertheless, a question needs to be considered: when asked, "What is (self-)forgiveness?", can we simply answer something like, "It is a form of voluntary release from resentment", or should the conditions under which this practice is fitting (i.e., done for the right sorts of reasons) be part of its definition? This second option is dominant in the literature, for instance in Milam's work, who defends a reason-based view of forgiveness. According to him, forgiving for the wrong kind of reasons doesn't count as forgiveness at all. It is precisely the specific reasons associated with forgiveness that allow us to distinguish it from other phenomena like letting go of blame (Milam 2019, Brunning & Milam 2023). For Milam, the right kind of reason for forgiveness are those having to with a change in the wrongdoer's behavior. He explains that:

> Some reasons to forgive are best understood as instances of a more general type. For example, apology, remorse, repentance, atonement, and making amends all seem to give us the same kind of reason to forgive. We forgive in response to such gesture

[27] Milam (2017:63) briefly discusses this point in relation with an objection from Arendt about the necessary distance between victim and offender. For a related discussion, it will be useful to read Monge (2023), on the paradox of self-forgiveness.

[28] By saying that we are still the same person I am not making a substantial metaphysical statement by saying that we are in an identity relationship with our past self. I am simply pointing out that there is an intuitive sense in which we are still the same person. Even if identity is not preserved, as Derek Parfit has shown, the person can survive and remain "the same" in a sense.

because we perceive an apparent change of heart on the part of the offender (2019: 247).

I shall call this view, the "right-reason view" of forgiveness. I first begin by discussing the case of other-forgiveness before showing why we should avoid adopting similar definitions of self-forgiveness. While addressing Milam's view, I am again concerned with the possibility question for self-forgiveness.

Let us consider again Brian's example and suppose one more time that Brian's ex-wife, Maria, decides to forgive him, even though he didn't apologize. She does this in order to move on with her life. According to Milam, Maria is "forgiving*"* for the wrong kind of reasons.[29] Therefore, she's not forgiving at all.[30] She's doing something else, perhaps simply letting go of her blame. Milam's argument is that the necessity to move on is a good reason to consider that Maria should stop blaming Brian but isn't a reason "to believe that [she] should view [Brian] differently than his misconduct warrants" (Milam, 2019: 245). Contrary to Milam, I think that reasons such as the necessity to move on with one's life can function as reasons to view the perpetrator differently "than his misconduct warrants". It is a reason, but it is, plausibly, a reason of the wrong kind: we would expect a reason having to do with a change of heart in the offender to play this role. But Maria's case may suggest otherwise. Observe that we pre-theoretically acknowledge the existence of many good reasons to forgive, such as the fact that forgiving is needed to move on with our lives. The same is true of other attitudes and emotions such as hope. As Miriam Schleifer-McCormick has demonstrated, there can be both practical and evidential reasons for hope (2017: 132). The fact that the weather channel says that it might be sunny on my wedding day is a reason of the right kind for hoping that it will be sunny but so is the fact that I read somewhere that hope is beneficial for my mental health and will help me cope with the wedding planning stress. The same applies to forgiveness and self-forgiveness: prudential reasons are not necessarily reasons of the wrong kind and, even if they are, it does not mean, *pace* Milam, that what we are doing is not forgiveness.[31]

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[29] I'm not going to get into the thorny debate of what is a good reason for an attitude. For a discussion of the different positions see Sharadin (2016).

[30] Something that ought to be granted to Milam is that there are many people who believe they are forgiving when everything in their attitude indicate that they have not really forgiven. Those cases could be labelled as "illusory cases of forgiveness". However, the fact that some people may be wrong about whether they have forgiven or not is not a way to save Milam's theory. Indeed, these people could be wrong about their forgiveness even if their reason for claiming that they have forgiven is of the right kind according to Milam.

[31] Another way to put it like Pamela Hieronimy (2005: 440) does is to say something can count as a reason either for the attitude, viz. to believe or to forgive or count in favor of the content of the attitude, viz. that it is going to be sunny or that the perpetrator has changed or is no longer a threat. The problem with forgiveness is that contrary to other attitudes such as belief, it is not clear what the content of the attitude is so that it is not clear that a prudential reason does not count as a reason of the right kind for the attitude as well as for its content.

When Milam says that Maria is letting go of her blame but not forgiving, I say that Maria, having a good grasp of the concept of forgiveness, decides to forgive Brian.[32] She decides that her anger and resentment will no longer be appropriately experienced towards Brian and decides to view him in a different light. Here, importantly, I am not advocating a form of voluntarism about belief such that Maria can decide to believe that anger towards Brian will no longer be fitting. Anger would of course still be fitting in light of him being a terrible person, but it will no longer be internally rational for *her* to resent him since she decided to relinquish those sentiments towards him.

When I gave a minimal definition of self-forgiveness, I specified that self-forgiveness was a transformation such that negative emotions could no longer be experienced in a rational way. This, it seems to me, distinguishes self-forgiveness from simply letting go of self-blame. When one lets go of blame, be it of others or of oneself, the emotions remain rational in the sense that it would still be fitting to experience them. Things are different with forgiveness. As one has decided to view the perpetrator in a different light it would no longer fitting to experience resentment, for instance, towards them. It is thus a form of internal rationality that is at play here. So, we have a way of distinguishing the mere letting go of blame from genuine forgiveness without having to appeal to the notion of "right reason".

The idea that one can 'decide' to see someone in a different light conflict with a widespread and intuitive view of forgiveness, according to which it is more about the involuntary realization that the perpetrator has changed or is, in the end, not such a bad person. Of course, I am not denying that forgiveness often works in this way, but merely claim that it is also sometimes possible to *choose* to see someone differently and to *commit* to adopting a different attitude towards them. Marina Cantacuzino's book "The Forgiveness Project" is full of stories of people forgiving offenders by deciding to see them differently although they didn't apologize or provided reason for thinking they had a change of heart. Consider the following example. Camilla Carr and her partner Jon James are a couple who have been captured by Chechnyan rebels in 1997. During their captivity, Camilla was repeatedly raped by one of their captors. In the book, Camilla recalls how she could finally forgive her perpetrator and move on, describing the way in which her forgiveness was incomprehensible from the point of view of her friends:

> I couldn't stop crying and had no energy (…) it wasn't until 2001, when Jon and I moved to Wales that I found the space and silence to let go and surrender to weakness

[32] To be clear, I think that Brunning and Milam are completely right to emphasize that there is a phenomenon that is different from forgiveness and also allows us to move on after wrongdoing: letting go of blame. I just disagree with their claim according to which what allows to distinguish them are the reasons why we do them.

> and vulnerability. Some of our Chechnyan friends can't understand how we can forgive. (…) I tell them that I believe forgiveness begins with understanding, but you have to work through layers to obtain it. First you have to deal with your anger, then your tears and only once you reach the tears are you on the road to finding peace of mind.[33]

Here, Camilla's forgiveness stems mainly, if not only, from the necessity to have some closure and to overcome this tragic episode in her life. So, on Milam's view, since she is forgiving for the wrong kinds of reason, she is not forgiving at all. Contrary to this picture, it seems to me that Camilla is really forgiving, the remaining questions being whether her forgiveness is fitting. I am personally inclined to think that it is, insofar as the necessity to move one is plausibly a reason of the right kind. However, we can leave this question open as the point I wanted to press in this section is that even if forgiveness is done for the wrong kind of reasons, it nevertheless remains forgiveness. The same is true of other attitudes. Blame, for instance, remains blame, even if it stems from reasons of the wrong kind.

If all the conditions that make an instance of forgiveness fitting are included in its definition, then what role is there left for a rational assessment of forgiveness to play? If the notion of "right reason" is incorporated in the definition of forgiveness, then there can be no unfitting forgiveness. In Brian's wife case, Maria's, or in Camilla's case, the conclusion that since they are forgiving for the wrong kind of reasons they are not forgiving at all prevents us from saying that they are, simply, forgiving irrationally or unfittingly.[34]

It could be argued that we face a merely verbal dispute and that what I'm calling forgiveness Milam is calling ceasing to blame. This is not the case, because it is important to be able to confront people like Brian by emphasizing that they have *forgiven* themselves for the wrong kind of reasons or too easily, not just that they have stopped blaming *themselves* for the wrong kind of reasons or too easily. If we accept Milam's claim that Brian is not forgiving himself, there is no way that we can tell him "You shouldn't have forgiven yourself just because you wanted to move on". The inability to criticize the fittingness and rationality of Brian's self-forgiveness is already a problem. A second problem is that if the right reasons for forgiveness are moral reasons we might fall into a moralized definition of forgiveness. On such a moralized definition there can be no immoral forgiveness since it is built in its very definition that it can only be done for specific reasons that

[33] Cantacuzino, Archbishop Tutu & McCall Smith (2016: 276).

[34] Milam view (2018, 2019) still allows for *some* cases of unfitting forgiveness in which the victim forgives for a reason of the right kind (for example that the perpetrator has apologized) but in which case the context renders this reason insufficient because the perpetrator is still misbehaving towards the victim.

often turn out to be moral reasons (i.e., that the perpetrator has apologized, that he committed himself to doing better in the future, etc.). I think that it is important to be able to morally assess Brian's self-forgiveness, which becomes impossible if we are prevented from calling what he does self-forgiveness.

As far as self-forgiveness is concerned, it is precisely this kind of tendency that fosters the claim that self-forgiveness is incoherent. The "right-reasons" theory admits that an attitude can count as forgiveness if and only if it stems from some reasons, notably a perceived change of heart in the offender. Since self-forgiveness is often thought to stem from reasons other than the certainty that the victim has forgiven (e.g., because one would like to move on, because one is suffering, because one has a disproportionate self-love, etc.), it could be inferred that self-forgiveness is often incoherent. Again, we see the importance that is usually given to the victim's attitude. If we fail to forgive ourselves for the right reason, the right reason being the fact that the victim forgives us or that she should forgive us because we have made amends, our attitudes does not qualify as self-forgiveness.

Isn't it problematic to say to someone who affirms: "I forgive myself because I need to get better" that what she is doing is not forgiveness? To pick up on what was said above, we need to retain the possibility that there exist unfitting and immoral cases of (self-)forgiveness. Brian failed to take his wife's attitude into account, rendering his self-forgiveness both irrational and impermissible.[35] Nevertheless, this does not amount to saying that the general attitude of self-forgiveness is incoherent or intrinsically problematic or that Brian wasn't actually forgiving himself. Similarly, I can still be said to have cooked an apple cake even if it tastes awful. What I did is an apple cake, it is just a bad one.[36] This way of understanding forgiveness allows rationality and morality to play their role in discriminating between rational/irrational and morally acceptable/inacceptable forms of (self) forgiveness. Though it is not clear that any cake that I intend to bake with the goal of baking an apple cake will count as an apple cake. Imagine that I forget the apple. No matter what I intended to do, it will not count as an apple cake. Contrary to apples in the apple cake, I don't think that the consideration of the victim's attitude is a necessary ingredient for self-forgiveness.[37] And so we can answer the possibility question: yes, self-forgiveness is possible.

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[35] This is not to say that it is always a necessary condition for appropriate self-forgiveness to take the victim's attitude into account. Simply, in this particular case, the moral problem seems to lie in the total lack of concern for the other's suffering. This paper does not seek to lay out the conditions for moral self-forgiveness but merely to discuss the link between self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others.

[36] I am grateful to (redacted) for raising this important point.

[37] There are things for which our reason for doing them must be taken into consideration and things for which our reason for doing them do not matter. For example, my reasons for having children does not influence the fact that they will be my children. For other things though, our reasons seem to be important. For example, my actions do not

Conclusion

These remarks conclude my discussion of self-forgiveness and its link with forgiveness from the victim. I have shown that self-forgiveness should not be reduced to an imperfect form of forgiveness and that this assumption only stems from a poor understanding of the phenomenon. I argued that forgiveness is subject-relative, and that there is no such thing as being forgiven simpliciter. Being forgiven is a relational fact. Next, I have discussed the view according to which self-forgiveness is incoherent on the ground that, if one always is in a position to forgive oneself, one was not blaming oneself in the first place. To assuage this worry, I drew a parallel with the notion of duty to the self. Finally, I discussed the right-reason view of forgiveness, showing why it is important to have a definition of (self-)forgiveness that is as normatively neutral as possible. This allows to conclude that self-forgiveness is not incoherent or immoral.

The view of self-forgiveness that was the target of this paper is but one example of a more general tendency to treat reflexive moral phenomena such as self-blame, partiality to oneself, duties to oneself etc., as imperfect manifestations of the interpersonal paradigmatic case. This should draw our attention to a more general problem in moral philosophy: the fact that morality's focus on interpersonal relations discourages any attempt to seriously take reflexive moral practices into account.

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count as generous if I do them only for the sake of being praised. When it comes to forgiveness and self-forgiveness, I think we find ourselves dealing with phenomena of the first kind: what matters is the result, that one is forgiven, that one has undergone a transformation of some sort, and that one can move on with one's life. I am indebted to (redacted) for bringing this point to my attention.

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